

Knowing Your Roots

The Howlands: The history of three brothers in Duxbury

By Mary McKenzie
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If you've ever visited the beach or park at Howland's Landing, you know what a beautiful place it is. Dogs are playing, people are heading out to their boats or clamming or sunning themselves. It's a perfect spot to spend a weekend afternoon.

But there's a story behind how that idyllic area off Standish Street got its name.

Three Howland brothers came to Duxbury (one of whom settled in Marshfield) from England. John Howland came over on the Mayflower as the servant of John Carver. He is the man who went overboard during rough seas and held onto a rope long enough for the crew to haul him back. He is described as a "Duxbury planter" in Lechford's Notebook.

Arthur and Henry Howland came over afterward. These two brothers were Quakers. Hard to believe that the peace-loving Quaker religion would create controversy, but at the time, it was hard to be a Quaker in Massachusetts. In fact, people who were Quaker were being killed, whipped or had their ears cut off. (Quaker missionary Mary Dyer was hung in Boston as a witch and many others were just sent out from colonies with the assumption that they could die.)

It was not quite so rough in Duxbury or much of Plymouth Colony, but it was still difficult to be a Quaker. Plymouth Colony, in general, was more tolerant of Quakers and none were killed here, but there were incidents of whippings (Quaker men who were "verbally abusing" John Alden and Thomas Southworth were initially thrown out of the colony and when they came back two days later, they were publicly whipped.)

Some of the Quakers thought they had a friend in John Alden, who was described as "cordial" to them, but Alden went back to authorities to give the names of those he met who talked about the Quaker religion.

As a side note, another father of Duxbury, John Soule, was also a Quaker and is listed as one of those having to pay a fine for attending Quaker services. And then there is a Romeo and Juliet kind of love story – a young Quaker boy who was in love with the governor's daughter, but the governor was decidedly not a Quaker and was not OK with the romance.

Arthur Howland had five children: Deborah, Mary, Martha, Elizabeth and Arthur. Arthur's son, Arthur Jr., married Elizabeth Prence after a stilted courtship in which Gov. Thomas Prence asked for him to stop courting his daughter because it was against his wishes for Elizabeth to marry Arthur Howland Jr. The marriage created an awkward situation as the governor now had Quaker in-laws. This Howland settled in Marshfield and is only listed once in connection with Duxbury. But for Plymouth Colony, he is listed as being fined for holding Quaker meetings in his home and for resisting the Marshfield constable (who wanted to arrest the minister, but Howland said he would hurt him if he did).

Henry Howland, the other brother of John from the Mayflower, was the constable of Duxbury in 1633. He lived by the bay in what is described as "substantial property" in Justin Winsor's 1847 book, "The History of Duxbury." He was frequently a member of trial and grand juries. Howland was often fined for having Quaker meetings in his house and was accused of "entertaining" the wife of a man who had complained to him, in his home. He denied the charges of having this woman in his house and the evidence did not support the charge, but the Quaker meeting charges stuck. He was convicted on May 1, 1660.

Henry Howland continued to be active in Duxbury and worked as highway surveyor for the town in 1668. He made out his will in 1670, leaving everything to his wife Mary and children: Zoeth, Joseph, John, Samuel, Sarah, Elizabeth, Mary and Abigail. Joseph Howland was named constable for Duxbury with Isaac Barker in 1687.

John Howland, who hailed from Fenstanton, Huntingdonshire, England, came over on the Mayflower as the servant of John Carver. After the death of Carver, he rose rapidly as a leader in the colony and married Carver's daughter, Elizabeth. In 1627 he was the leader of one of the twelve groups that divided the livestock for the colony and then became one of the eight so-called "Plymouth Undertakers" who took on the colony's debt to the merchants who financed them in England, so that people could spread out from the Plymouth settlement and build their own farms.

John Howland was a freeman by 1633. He was in charge of the colony outpost in Kennebec, ME where there were various fights between the British and French on who controlled the outpost. He was elected as a deputy for Plymouth and was active in the church there as a lay leader (he did not become a Quaker). He died at 80, on Feb. 24, 1672.

"He was a good old disciple and had been somewhat a magistrate here, a plain-hearted Christian," Rev. John Cotton said about John Howland.

With his wife Elizabeth, John Howland had eight children: John, Jabez, Joseph, Isaac, Desire, Hope, Elizabeth, Lydia, Hannah and Ruth.

John and Elizabeth Howland have a large number of descendants and may have just as many as the Aldens. It has been argued often that the lineage of the Howlands may actually be attributable to three brothers, as opposed to John Alden by himself for the Alden kindred.

The information for this article was obtained from "Plymouth Colony, Its History and People, 1620-1691," by Eugene Aubrey Stratton and "Records of the Town of Duxbury 1642-1770," as well as "History of Duxbury," by Justin Winsor. All are available at Drew Archives of the Duxbury Rural and Historical Society.